

## FEATURE

# I Worked for Alex Jones. I Regret It.

I dropped out of film school to edit video for the conspiracy theorist because I believed in his worldview. Then I saw what it did to people.

By Josh Owens

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**O**n Election Day 2016, I sat in the passenger seat of Alex Jones's Dodge Hellcat as we swerved through traffic, making our way to a nearby polling place. As Jones punched the gas pedal to the floor, the smell of vodka, like paint thinner, wafted up from the white Dixie cup anchored in the console. My stomach churned as the phone I held streamed live video to Facebook: Jones rambling about voter fraud and rigged elections while I stared at the screen, holding the camera at an angle to hide his double chin. It rarely worked, but I didn't want to be blamed when he watched the video later.

Four years earlier, Jones — wanting to expand his website, Infowars, into a full-blown guerrilla news operation and hoping to scout new hires from his growing fan base — held an online contest. At 23, I was vulnerable, angry and searching for direction, so I decided to give it a shot. Out of what Infowars said were hundreds of submissions, my video — a half-witted, conspiratorial glance at the creation and function of the Federal Reserve — made it to the final round.

Unconvinced I could cut it as a reporter, Jones offered me a full-time position as a video editor. I quit film school and moved nearly a thousand miles to Austin, Tex., fully invested in propagating his worldview. By the time I found myself seated next to Jones speeding down the highway, I had seen enough of the inner workings of Infowars to know better.

Before we left the office, Jones instructed me to title the video “Alex Jones Denied Right to Vote” when uploading to YouTube. He knew before we left that they wouldn't let us walk into a polling location with our cameras rolling. I don't think Jones even intended to vote. Rather, he hoped to turn this into a spectacle, an insult to him personally, another opportunity to play the self-aggrandizing victim.

“Look at this great city shot,” he said pointing out the window at Austin’s skyline. As soon as I pulled the camera off him, he reached for the white Dixie cup. *Is this really how I’m going to die?* I thought to myself, imagining the scene: Jones veering too close to the guardrail, ranting about George Soros and Hillary Clinton. Sirens echoing in the distance, flashing lights reflecting off oil-soaked pavement as he grabs the camera and utters his final words, “Hillary ... rigged ... the car.” His listeners would have believed it. Years earlier, *I* would have believed it.

Fortunately, there were no sirens or flashing lights, and I was relieved when “Vote Here” signs began to appear. A line stretched out the door of the polling place, in a local strip mall, by the time we arrived. As I expected, Jones was told multiple times that he couldn’t film at a polling place, and he decided to leave. Walking back to the car, still taking sips from his white cup, he began noticeably slurring his words. A friend of Jones’s who tagged along — for “security purposes” — offered to give me a ride back to the office. Jones revved his engine, tires squealing as he sped out of the parking lot.

I began listening to Jones’s radio show — the flagship program of what is now a conspiracist media empire with an audience that until recently surpassed a million people — in the last days of George W. Bush’s presidency. The American public had been sold a war through outright fabrications; the economy was in free fall thanks to Wall Street greed and the failure of Washington regulators. Most of the mainstream media was caught flat-footed by these developments, but Jones seemed to have an explanation for everything. He railed against government corruption and secrecy, the militarization of police. He confronted those in power, traipsed through the California redwoods to expose the secretive all-male meeting of elites at Bohemian Grove and even appeared in two Richard Linklater films as himself, screaming into a megaphone.

But it wasn’t the politics that initially drew me in. Jones had a way of imbuing the world with mystery, adding a layer of cinematic verisimilitude that caught my attention. Suddenly, I was no longer a bored kid attending an overpriced art school. I was Fox Mulder combing through the X-Files, Rod Serling opening a door to the Twilight Zone, even Rosemary Woodhouse convinced that the neighbors were members of a ritualistic cult. I believed that the world was strategically run by a shadowy, organized cabal, and that Jones was a hero for exposing it.

I had my limits. I can’t say I ever believed his avowed theory that Sandy Hook was a staged event to push for gun control; to Jones, everything was a “false flag.” I didn’t believe that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama smelled like sulfur because of their proximity to hell or that Planned Parenthood was run by “Nazi baby killers.” But it was easy to brush off these fever dreams as eccentricities and excesses — not the heart of the Alex Jones operation but mere diversions.

Once I started working there, however, it became obvious that one was impossible to separate one from the other. Soon after I was hired, Jones's Infowars-branded store — which sells emergency-survival foods, water filters, body armor and much more — introduced an iodine supplement, initially marketed as a “shield” against nuclear fallout. Still learning the ropes, I was tasked with creating video advertisements for the supplement, which he ran on his online TV show. One of these ads started with a shot of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant as it exploded. I doubled the sound of the explosion, adding a glitch filter and sirens in the background for dramatic effect. Jones stood over my shoulder as I edited. “This is great,” he said. “See if you can find flyover footage of Chernobyl as well.”

*[Read more about Alex Jones's merchandise empire.]*

Shortly after Jones began selling the supplements, someone posted a video on YouTube holding a Geiger counter displaying high radiation readings on a beach in Half Moon Bay, Calif. The video went viral, stoking fears that radiation from Fukushima was drifting across the Pacific Ocean. Jones saw an opportunity and sent me, along with a reporter, a writer and another cameraman, to California. We had multiple Geiger counters shipped overnight, unaware of how to read or work them, and drove up the West Coast, frequently stopping to check radiation levels. Other than a small spike in Half Moon Bay — which the California Department of Public Health said was from naturally occurring radioactive materials, not Fukushima — we found nothing.

Jones was furious. We started getting calls from the radio-show producers in the office, warning us to stop posting videos to YouTube stating we weren't finding elevated levels of radiation. We couldn't just stop, though; Jones demanded constant real-time content. On some of these calls, I could hear Jones screaming in the background. One of the producers told me they had never seen him so angry.

We scrambled to find something, anything we could report on. We tested freshly caught crab from a dock in Crescent City, Calif., and traveled to the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant in Avila Beach, asking fishermen if we could test the small croakers they caught off a nearby pier. We even tried to locate a small nuclear-waste facility just so we could capture the Geiger counter displaying a high number. But we couldn't find what Jones wanted, and after two weeks of traveling from San Diego to Portland, we flew back to Texas as failures, bracing for Jones's rage. (Jones did not respond to detailed queries sent before publication by The Times Magazine.)

Over time, I came to learn that keeping Jones from getting angry was a big part of the job, though it was impossible to predict his outbursts. Stories abounded among my co-workers: The blinds stuck, so he ripped them off the wall. A water cooler had mold in it, so he grabbed

a large knife, stabbed the plastic base wildly and smashed it on the ground. Headlines weren't strong enough; the news wasn't being covered the way he wanted; reporters didn't know how to dress properly. Once a co-worker stopped by the office with a pet fish he was taking home to his niece. It swam in circles in a small, transparent bag. When Jones saw the bag balanced upright on a desk in the conference room, he emptied it into a garbage can. On one occasion, he threatened to send out a memo banning laughter in the office. "We're in a war," he said, and he wanted people to act accordingly.

I also saw Jones give an employee the Rolex off his own wrist, simply because he thought the employee was mad at him. "Now, would a bad guy do that?" Jones asked as he handed over the watch. Once, when I went to interview a frequent guest of Jones's, I was sent with a check to cover a potentially lifesaving cancer treatment. A few times I came close to quitting, and like clockwork, just before I pulled the plug, I received a bonus or significant raise. I hadn't discussed my discontent with Jones, but he seemed to sense it.

Jones often told his employees that working for him would leave a black mark on our records. To him, it was the price that must be paid for boldly confronting those in power — what he called the New World Order or, later, the deep state. Once my beliefs began to shift, I saw the virulent nature of his world, the emptiness and loathing in many of those impassioned claims. But I was certain that after four years working for Jones, I would never be able to get another job — banished into poverty as penance for my transgressions, and rightly so.

**When Jones wanted to blow off steam, we would travel** to a private ranch outside Austin to shoot guns. Among other firearms, we would bring the two Barrett .50-caliber rifles he kept stashed in the office. Because we never missed an opportunity to create more content, we also brought along cameras to turn whatever happened into a segment for his show.

I remember one trip in particular. It was the summer of 2014, and I rode to the ranch in the back of a co-worker's truck, surrounded by semiautomatic rifles, boxes of ammunition and Tannerite, an explosive rifle target. A few of us left early in the morning, arriving before Jones to film B-roll and load magazines; he had no patience for preparation. When he came hours later, after eating a few handfuls of jalapeño chips, he picked up an AR-15 and accidentally fired it in my direction.

The bullet hit the ground about 10 feet away from me. One employee, who was already uncomfortable around firearms, lost it, accusing Jones of being careless and flippant. This was one of the few times I saw someone call Jones out and the only time he didn't get angry in response. He claimed he had intentionally fired the gun as a joke — as if this were any better.

I stood by silently, considering what might have happened if the gun had been pointed a little to the right. After a while the upset employee let it go, and no one brought it up again. We cracked open a few more beers, filled an old television with Tannerite and blew it up.

One weekend, a few people from the office went hunting at a game reserve. On the following Monday, I was handed a hard drive full of video files and told to edit them for Jones to air on his show later in the week. “There are clips in here that are pretty bad, things we don’t want to get out, so let me take a look at this before we upload it,” one of my managers said.

The first video I clicked on came from a cellphone. The camera pans across a blood-covered floor in what looked like a garage. Dead animals were scattered about: eyes lifeless, tongues hanging from their mouths, crimson streaks splashed on their fur.

In another video, a bison grazed quietly in the shade of a large tree; it reminded me of a tableau at the American Museum of Natural History. Then the camera panned over to Jones, maybe 20 yards away, holding what looked like a handgun. Jones began firing at the bison, tufts of hair flying with every hit. The animal remained standing as Jones shot round after round. Finally, the hunting guide yelled at Jones to stop and handed him a high-caliber rifle. Jones took a moment to make sure the cameras were still recording and fired a few more rounds as the animal finally collapsed.

*[Watching Alex Jones answer questions under oath is an antidote to a “post-truth” age.]*

I shared a large room with three other employees, and Jones often walked into our office after he wrapped for the day. His first question was always “How was the show?” If anyone said it was great — someone, if not everyone, always said it was great — his response was the same. “Really?” he would say, moving over to their side of the room. “Did you really think it was great? What did you like about it?”

Working for Jones was a balancing act. You had to determine where he was emotionally and match his tone quickly. If he was angry, then you had better get angry. If he was joking around, then you could relax, sort of, always looking out of the corner of your eye for his mood to turn at any moment.

Late one night, after an extended live broadcast, Jones walked into my office shirtless. This was normal; he removed his shirt frequently around us. He pulled out a bottle of Grey Goose from a storage cabinet and filled his cup. He stumbled into his private restroom, changed into a clean black polo shirt and stepped back into our office. “Hit me,” he said to an employee in the room. When the employee refused, Jones got louder, his face redder. “Hit me!” He kept saying it, getting closer each time. Finally, knowing Jones would never relent, the employee gave him a weak tap on the shoulder.

“Oh, come on,” he said, “hit me harder!”

The employee punched him hard in the shoulder. Jones grunted on impact, seeming to enjoy the pain. Then, it was his turn. Smirking, he planted his feet, reared back and lunged his body weight forward as his fist connected with the man’s arm. I could hear the dull thud of impact, then a wincing sigh. They traded a few more punches, each time seeming less playful. Jones became wild-eyed, spit flying from his clenched teeth as he exhaled. On his last hit, the sound was different. Wet. I thought I could hear the meat split open in the employee’s arm. Jones roared as he punched a cabinet, denting the door in. A few weeks later, I heard that Jones had broken a video editor’s ribs after playing the same game in a downtown bar.

**Having aligned himself** with Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential race, Jones might now be considered a version of a conservative, but his perspective is much more complicated than that. Infowars was like a lot of digital-media outlets, in that we reported on the things our top editor thought would go viral. But because our boss was Alex Jones, this was a peculiar process. Assignments were often handed down live on the air during his show. We were to have it playing throughout the office, always listening for directives. Ideas for stories mostly came from what other news outlets reported. Jones wanted us to “hijack” the mainstream media’s coverage and use it to our advantage. If it fit into the Infowars narrative, it played.

When I wasn’t at the office, I spent much of my time traveling for Jones. I inhaled the tear gas in Ferguson, Mo., during the Black Lives Matter protests, retching as I hid with protesters, corralled by cops in riot gear. I stood next to armed cowboys and ranch hands as they faced off against the Bureau of Land Management to retrieve Cliven Bundy’s cattle in Nevada. I had dinner with the leader of the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan, at his home in Phoenix and spent a weekend at the compound of Jim Bakker, the televangelist who spent time in prison for fraud. Jones’s instinctual desire to distance himself from the mainstream led us to unusual and sometimes dark places.

In December 2015, the day before Jones interviewed Donald Trump, still a candidate at the time, on his radio show, I made my way to upstate New York on assignment, along with a reporter and second cameraman. We were sent to visit Muslim-majority communities throughout the United States to investigate what Jones instructed us to call “the American Caliphate.” After the California Geiger-counter debacle, we had meetings with Jones before trips in order to ascertain exactly what he wanted. If we “hit some home runs,” he said, we would get significant bonuses.

We landed in Newark at 12:30 p.m. on Dec. 1, 2015. The first stop was Islamberg, a Muslim community three hours north of Manhattan. It was founded in the 1980s by mostly African-American followers of a Pakistani cleric named Mubarik Ali Shah Gilani, who encouraged devotees of his conservative brand of Sufi Islam to establish small settlements across the rural United States. Gilani was suspected of association with the organization Jamaat ul-Fuqra, which was briefly designated as a terrorist group by the State Department in the 1990s; Gilani has denied any connection to the group. His followers in Islamberg had no record of violence, and some of them had denounced the Islamic State in an interview with Reuters earlier that year, saying they didn't believe Islamic State members to be real Muslims. But unfounded rumors circulated around far-right corners of the internet that this community was a potential terrorist-training center. Jones, who thought the media consistently ingratiated themselves with Islamic extremists, believed them.

We pulled in, unannounced, to a dirt drive leading to the community, stopping at a flimsy cattle gate guarded by two men. The reporter, wearing a hidden camera, approached the entrance as we filmed the interaction from the vehicle. The men were calm and polite, if a little suspicious — reasonable given the circumstances. They denied our entry into Islamberg but took our number and told us we could return after they verified who we were.

It was only later, after listening to the audio from the reporter's hidden camera, that I heard what he told the two men guarding the gate. "Basically, what we do is, we go around, and we do videos debunking claims of stuff," the reporter said. "The word is, people say this is some kind of training camp, so we wanted to come in and get some footage and kind of put that whole rumor to rest."

He gave them his real name — a name that, with a quick Google search, would lead back to Infowars, with its headlines like "Inside Sources: Bin Laden's Corpse Has Been on Ice for Nearly a Decade," "Special Report: Why Obama Brought Ebola to U.S. Exposed" and "VIDEO: 'Demon' Caught on Camera During Obama Visit?" Those headlines could be described by many words, but none of them would be "debunking."

Because of the conspiracy theories about the place, Islamberg was a constant target of right-wing extremists. That April, a Tennessee man was arrested and later convicted of plotting to raise a militia to burn Islamberg's mosque to the ground. Only days before we arrived, the F.B.I. issued an alert to law enforcement to be on the lookout for a man named Jon Ritzheimer, the leader of an anti-Muslim movement in Arizona who posted a video threatening violence against Muslims less than two weeks earlier. In the video, he brandished a handgun, saying: "I'm urging all Americans across the U.S. everywhere in public, start carrying a slung rifle with you, everywhere. Don't be a victim in your own country."

So the phone call we received later that night from a law-enforcement agent shouldn't have come as a surprise. The officer who contacted us said he simply wanted to verify who we were after receiving a concerned call from someone in Islamberg. We told Jones about it, and he chose to believe the call was a veiled threat, an attempt to intimidate us into silence. To him, this verified that we were onto something. He even went so far as to include Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City, in the purported conspiracy, claiming he wanted to abolish the Second Amendment — and that somehow intimidating us would achieve that.

Jones told us to file a story that accused the police of harassment, lending credence to the theory that this community contained dangerous, potential terrorists. I knew this wasn't the case according to the information we had. We all did. Days before, we spoke to the sheriff and the mayor of Deposit, N.Y., a nearby municipality. They both told us the people in Islamberg were kind, generous neighbors who welcomed the surrounding community into their homes, even celebrating holidays together.

The information did not meet our expectations, so we made it up, preying on the vulnerable and feeding the prejudices and fears of Jones's audience. We ignored certain facts, fabricated others and took situations out of context to fit our narrative, posting headlines like:

*Drone Investigates Islamic Training Center*

*Shariah Law Zones Confirmed in America*

*Infowars Reporters Stalked by Terrorism Task Force*

*Report: Obama's Terror Cells in the U.S.*

*The Rumors Are True: Shariah Law Is Here!*

Our next stop was Hamtramck, a Muslim-majority city embedded within Detroit that alarmists in neighboring communities called Shariahville. As we headed west, my phone vibrated, and a news alert appeared on the screen. There were reports that a mass shooting that week in San Bernardino, Calif., had been perpetrated by Islamic extremists, making it at the time the deadliest Islamic attack in the United States since Sept. 11.

I knew that when the details emerged, they would substantiate the lies we pushed to Jones's audience. It didn't matter if the attack took place on the other side of the country or if the people in Islamberg had no connection to the perpetrators in San Bernardino. Jones's listeners would draw imaginary lines between the two, and we were helping them do it.



**I quit working** for Jones on April 7, 2017. When offered another job, an introductory position with a 75 percent pay cut, I jumped at the opportunity. Instead of giving two weeks' notice, I left in three hours. Jones had gone home for the day, so I didn't speak with him in person. I said goodbye to co-workers and managers, handed over my company credit card and hoped that would be the end of it. Two nights later, I received a call from Jones: "Let me tell you a little secret," he said in his gravelly voice. "I don't like it anymore, either."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't want to do it anymore," he said, "and I got all these people working for me, and you know, then I feel guilty. I don't want to do it. You think I want to keep doing this? I haven't wanted to do this for five years, man." I sensed that he was pandering, but I couldn't help thinking that for the first time since I started this job, Jones and I finally had something in common. Sure, there was a time when I shared his anger. In fact, I was still angry. But this is where we differed: I wasn't angry with others; I was angry with myself. And once I realized that, it was easier to walk away. When I left, I tried to put myself in his shoes, to figure out why he said and did the things he did. At times I saw a different side to Jones, one that was vulnerable, desiring validation and acceptance. Then he would say something so vile and callous it became impossible to look past it.

Even though I was no longer beholden to Jones for financial security, I couldn't be honest about how I felt. I was to blame for my actions, unequivocally, and yet I resented Jones for creating an environment of rage, fear and confusion that diminished discernment, increased self-doubt and left me feeling as if my brain had short-circuited. I wanted to say these things to Jones, but I didn't.

He offered to double my pay, suggested I work remotely and even proposed funding a feature-length film of my own. I said it wasn't about money and turned him down. To this day, I still don't know why he wanted to keep me around. He said it was because he cared about me, but if I had to guess, I would say his main concern was losing control.

The next morning, he called numerous times, and then again that evening. I let the calls go to voice mail.

There wasn't a single moment that persuaded me to leave, but there was a turning point: a moment that stuck with me long after it happened. I thought of it as I sat next to Jones speeding recklessly down the highway on Election Day, when I walked out of the office for the last time and when I decided to sit down and write this article.

It was early morning, and we were headed back to Austin after the trip that began in Islamberg. As we boarded our flight, I took my window seat close to the rear of the plane. An older woman wearing a hijab sat next to me. With her was a young girl, giddy with excitement, who bounced in the middle seat, holding a bag of pretzels. The woman leaned over and asked if I would let the girl sit by the window. “This is her first time on a plane,” she said. I agreed and moved my bag from under the seat.

I thought of the children who lived in Islamberg: how afraid their families must have felt when their communities were threatened and strangers appeared asking questions; how we chose to look past these people as individuals and impose on them more of the same unfair suspicions they already had to endure. And for what? Clickbait headlines, YouTube views?

As I sat on the aisle, the plane now lifting up into the pale blue sky, I glanced over at the little girl staring out the window in wonder, her face glowing from the light reflecting off the clouds. She was amazed, joyful, innocent, carefree and completely unaware of the world beneath her.

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